

Gout

Emergency Department factsheets

What is Gout?

Gout is a type of inflammatory arthritis that develops because of high levels of uric acid in the body. Uric acid is produced naturally by the body from eating foods that have purines. Purines are substances in animal and plant foods that the body converts to uric acid.

Normally the body rids itself of extra uric acid through the kidneys into the urine. However, this does not happen fast enough in people with gout. With gout, excess uric acid builds up in the joints and forms needle-like crystals that cause extreme pain.

What causes Gout?

A gout attack can be provoked by joint injury, infection, kidney problems, medications, or diet habits (e.g. a purine-rich, sugary diet, drinking too much alcohol or not enough water).

Being overweight, having a family history of gout or having untreated high blood pressure, diabetes or metabolic syndrome also increases the risk of developing gout.

What are the symptoms?

Gout affects more men than women. Gout in pre-menopausal women is rare. An attack of gout is usually sudden often overnight. The joint becomes very red, swollen and extremely painful. Often the joint is intensely sore to touch.

Gout normally affects one joint at a time, often the joint of the big toe. Other joints, such as the hands, wrists, knees, ankles and elbows, can also be affected by gout. The pain may last hours or weeks. The build-up of uric acid can look and feel like lumps under the skin (tophi). It can also collect in the kidneys and cause small, hard deposits (kidney stones).

Diagnosing gout?

Diagnosis is based on symptoms, medical history, lifestyle, and laboratory tests.

- Blood tests can measure uric acid, although high levels don't always mean gout. Some people with gout may have low uric acid levels at times, even during flares.
- Blood tests are most useful in ruling out other causes for your symptoms, such as joint infections or other forms of arthritis.
- A needle can be used to withdraw fluid from the swollen joint. The fluid obtained can be examined by the laboratory for the presence of crystals. This choice of diagnostic approach is most commonly used if it is unclear if the joint is infected or has gout.
- X-rays are often normal in the early stages so are not very useful in diagnosing gout.
- In complex or atypical cases, a form of CT call DECT may be used to aid in diagnosis of gout. Your doctor will discuss the benefits and risks associated with have this form of imaging.

Treatment

Each person with gout needs a unique treatment plan. Together, you and your doctor can develop an ongoing plan to control uric acid levels and fight inflammation. Kidney function and uric acid levels may affect choice of treatment. The main goals of gout treatment are to:

- prevent uric acid build up e.g. Allopurinol lowers uric acid levels in the blood and also blocks its production
- reduce inflammation that can affect joints and organs e.g. Colchicine can ease a gout flare however has some side effects
- nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) can ease pain and swelling

- in some cases Glucocorticoid medications can be used to ease acute gout flares.

Self management

Diet and lifestyle can help manage gout and prevent flares. It's important to watch your diet and maintain a healthy weight. Participating in regular physical activity and maintaining a healthy weight can lower your risk of repeated gout attacks, as well as the chances of developing heart disease, which is common in people with gout.

Diet

- Eating a healthy diet rich in vegetables, whole grains, plant proteins (e.g. beans, lentils, peas), healthy fats (e.g. nuts, extra-virgin olive oil) and minimally processed foods may reduce your risk of a gout attack.
- Eliminating or minimizing purine-rich meats/seafoods, organ meats and watching alcohol intake can help lessen uric acid levels in the body and limit acute gout flares.
- Purine-rich vegetables like spinach or mushrooms are usually safe to eat.
- Low-fat dairy foods may lower uric acid levels and help manage gout.
- Avoid drinks high in sugar or fructose, like concentrated juices or sodas.
- Drink plenty of water.

Weight loss

If you are overweight, lose weight gradually. Make sure you have a healthy diet as 'crash' or 'starvation diets' can actually increase uric acid levels. See a dietitian for advice.

What to expect

Gout flares usually get better within a week to 10 days, and symptoms can disappear with healthy lifestyle choices. Sometimes the next attack may not happen for months or even years. Medications that lower uric acid can help prevent gout attacks and keep the condition from becoming chronic. It's important that once you have an attack, to partner with your doctor to control uric acid levels and prevent future gout attacks.

Seeking help

You need to see a doctor or health-care professional promptly if you:

- have pain that does not improve with painkillers
- have increased severe joint swelling
- have increased stiffness
- feel generally unwell with a fever
- cannot function at home.

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional. In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

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